

BLAST KEY

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] This invention relates to a blast key for use in a blasting arrangement.

[0002] A typical blasting arrangement includes a plurality of detonators and a blast control unit which is used for firing the detonators in a controlled manner. The blasting arrangement also includes a blast energy source and a blast key which constitutes a physical link in an electrical path between the blast energy source and the detonators. The blast key is usually constituted by a switch, a relay contact or a physically removable link. Once the blast key is in place and is connected to the remainder of the blast arrangement the detonators can be armed and fired. The blast key is removable – a characteristic which is intended to prevent unwanted or inadvertent firing of the detonators.

[0003] A drawback with a blast key of the aforementioned kind is that the blast key can fail, to a temporary or permanent closed state, due to a variety of sources, for example due to excessive vibration or shock. It is also possible for contacts, with which the blast key is to be engaged, to be short-circuited by any conductive material which accidentally bridges the contacts. Under this type of situation the blast control unit can cause an unplanned initiation of the detonators with potentially serious adverse consequences.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0004] The invention provides a blast key which includes a body and a blast energy generator in or on the body.

[0005] The blast key may include a switch which is in series with the blast energy generator.

[0006] The switch may be manually, electrically or electromechanically controlled.

[0007] The blast key may include a logic control unit or one or more control switches or
5 buttons for controlling the switch.

[0008] The body may be in the nature of a housing in which the blast energy generator is mounted.

[0009] The body may include a plurality of terminals to enable the blast energy generator to be connected to a blast control unit.

10 **[0010]** In one embodiment the blast key includes an energy source for actuating the blast energy generator, in a controlled manner.

[0011] The invention also provides a blasting arrangement which includes a plurality of detonators, a blast control unit, and a blast key which is removably connected, directly or indirectly, to the detonators and the blast control unit, and wherein the blast key
15 includes a blast energy generator which provides electrical energy at a predetermined voltage for arming the detonators.

[0012] The electrical energy which is provided by the blast energy generator may be derived from an energy source which is included in the blast key or, more preferably, from an energy source which is under the control of the blast control unit.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

[0013] The invention is further described by way of example only with reference to the accompanying drawing which is a block diagram illustration of a blasting arrangement which makes use of a blast key according to the invention.

5 DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0014] The accompanying drawing illustrates a blasting arrangement 10 which includes a blast control unit 12, a plurality of detonators 14 of any appropriate kind which are connected in a desired configuration to the blast control unit 12, and a blast key 16 according to the invention.

10 [0015] The blast key may take on any of a plurality of different configurations. The blast key, in the illustrated example, includes a body 18 in the nature of a small portable housing in or on which are mounted a blast energy generator 22, a switch 24 which is connected in series to the blast energy generator, control logic 26, and a plurality of control buttons 28.

15 [0016] The blast control unit 12 is of a kind which is known in the art and for this reason its construction and operation are not described in detail herein. The blast control unit includes a plurality of terminals 30. The body 18 includes a corresponding plurality of terminals 32 which enable the blast key to be electrically connected to the blast control unit when required.

20 [0017] The body 18 is a portable device which can be removed from the blast arrangement, and which can be connected to the blast arrangement, when necessary. In one example of the invention the blast control unit 12 provides energy to the blast

energy generator 22, when the switch 24 (which is optional) is closed, and the blast energy generator changes the voltage of the electrical energy, using techniques which are known in the art, to a level which is suitable for arming the detonators 14. It is to be noted that, as a safety feature, the blast control unit 12 is physically incapable of directly
5 providing energy at a suitable voltage level for arming the detonators.

[0018] As the blast energy generator 22 is physically removable, together with the body 18, from the blasting arrangement, the safety of the blasting system is enhanced. The blast control unit 12 is inherently safe and, provided the blast key 16 is not connected to the blast control unit, excessive vibration or shock or an electrical short-circuit will not
10 put the blast control unit into a condition in which it can set off a blast of the detonators 14. This can occur only if the blast key 16 is physically engaged with the blast control unit and the blast control unit is used directly or indirectly to energise the blast energy generator.

[0019] The safety of the blast key can be further enhanced by making use of the switch
15 24. The switch 24 may be a manual switch, an electronic switch or an electromechanical switch. In the last two mentioned cases the switch can be controlled by means of the control logic block 26 so that the switch can only be operated if a correct logic state is present. Logic state changes can occur from different sources for example from a signal or signals input from an external control device, e.g. the control
20 buttons or switches i.e. input devices 28 on the blast key which are manually operable or from an electrical signal or signals from other control equipment which are input to the logic unit 26 via suitable communications links connected, for example, to one or more terminals 34 on the blast key, or from both sources in combination.

[0020] The control buttons 28 can be used for functions like "arm", a control mode which causes the blast energy generator to start generating electrical energy at a suitable voltage, and "fire", a control mode which is used to initiate firing of the detonators 14.

5 [0021] The blast arrangement 10 is inherently safe if the blast key 16 is not engaged with the blast control unit. Once the blast key is connected to the remainder of the blast arrangement the inherent safety of the system is not compromised for the arrangement only changes to a state in which it is capable of causing blasting once the blast key receives the correct instructions from the blast control unit 12 or if the local control logic
10 unit 26 or actuation of the control buttons 28 indicates that a correct logic state has been achieved. Either or both of the two last-mentioned conditions cause the switch 24 to close.

[0022] The detachable blast key with the on-board blast energy generator increases the shock tolerance of the blasting control equipment and eliminates problems which can
15 arise with prior art devices which have physical contacts which can be shorted or, in the case of a relay, which have contacts which are "sticky" and do not automatically return to normally open.

[0023] It is not usually possible for the blast key to power itself. Instead the blast key relies on other control equipment e.g. the blast control unit, to provide it with energy.
20 With this configuration the blast key is therefore inherently safe as a unit when it is disconnected from the blast arrangement.

[0024] It is possible, nonetheless, for the blast key to include an "on-board" energy source 40 which is shown in dotted lines. The source cannot energise the blast energy

generator 22 until the switch 24 is closed. An interlock can readily be provided to ensure that the switch 24 can only be closed if the blast key is in circuit and connected to the blast control unit 12 which then automatically assumes control of the switch 24 and the blast energy generator 22.

- 5 **[0025]** The optional control logic unit 26 provides an added state of logic which validates the remainder of the control equipment which is used together with the blast energy source.